

# Creating Advocates: A Social Network or Role-Making Phenomenon?

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New customers represent an important resource for direct selling organizations through advocacy behaviors, such as positively representing and promoting the company and salesperson to others. This paper presents a study of new customer advocacy behavior in a direct selling context, testing whether pre-existing social ties new customers have with an existing advocate leading to social ties with the salesperson or role performance of the salesperson lead to advocacy behaviors among new customers. Findings from a survey of customers of French direct selling organizations suggest that advocacy can be created in the absence of strong new customer/salesperson social ties. New customer advocacy appears to be a function of the salesperson intra-role performance and advocate expertise. Thus, advocacy behavior is a function of role-making rather than strength of social network ties. Managerial implications of the study findings are explored.

In today's viral environment, marketers are rushing to launch programs (Berman 2016), like refer-a-friend discounts, to create advocates, those customers willing to actively promote a brand, company, or product (Krapfel 1985). Advocacy programs can generate 10 to 20% revenue gains for established products (Knox et al. 2011), leading many companies to consider adding such programs to their marketing mix.

Customer advocates are a valuable marketing resource, helping to expand the customer base (Cho and Rutherford 2011); however, little is known about how advocates are created, particularly when salespeople are the primary go-to-market channel. Researchers have argued that the customer-salesperson link determines customer loyalty because loyalty is first to the salesperson and not to the product (Reynolds and Arnold 2000; Román and Martin 2014), and generally, advocacy behavior is understood to be a function of the psychological connection with a service provider or a brand (Badrinarayanan and Laverie 2011). Marketing scholars have long regarded advocacy as an important

consequence of customer commitment and satisfaction (e.g., Morgan and Hunt 1994).

In addition to social ties, we also consider the activities of the salesperson separate from the social network from which the new customer was obtained. Expectations regarding salesperson behavior influence new customers' view of salespeople. Thus, role theory is also considered in order to further explain customer advocacy behavior. The overarching research question is whether a new customer's initial advocacy behavior is a function of the strength of social ties or by role-making behaviors and expectations or some combination. Following the theoretical development, we formulate research hypotheses examined in a study of customers of French direct selling companies.

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

### Customer advocacy

Customer advocacy has a lengthy tradition of research in marketing. The concept of advocacy originates in

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role theory research (MacKenzie, Podsakoff, and Fetter 1993) and has been studied in regard to customer loyalty through positive word-of-mouth and recommendation (Bove and Johnson 2006). According to Krapfel (1985), advocates act as more than mere informational filters or sources of occasional positive word of mouth; they can be powerful allies for positively representing the company to consumers and potentially provide access for salespeople to reach new customers through social networks.

Lacey and Morgan (2009) suggest that customer advocacy behavior appears to be closely related to the position the advocate holds in the social network, one form of tie that binds the marketer to the market. Marketing literature has documented the influence of social relations on customer behaviors in market exchanges (Salzman, Matathia, and O'Reilly 2004; Van den Bulte and Wuyts 2007). Markets are interpersonal networks which influence market prices, sales, and other commercial outcomes (e.g., Schmitt, Skiera, and Van den Bulte 2011). The interpersonal nature of markets suggests that this socioeconomic phenomenon can be understood by applying social network theory (Granovetter 1985).

Frenzen and Davis (1990) applied social network theory over two decades ago when investigating the home party selling method and found that social networks, through the strength of social ties among actors and customer indebtedness to the salesperson, significantly affect the likelihood of purchase. When the influence of social relationships on customers is recognized, similar analysis can be used to understand the involvement of the customer in advocacy behavior.

Social embeddedness (Granovetter 1985) is a concept that explains how roles in social networks guide behavior. Where one is in the social network determines the expectations of others in the network, or that person's role. Thus, social embeddedness is the nexus of role theory and social network theory, and may be useful in understanding how customers become advocates.

Thus, we are establishing the advocate as a role, or type of social actor, in the social network, with a focus on the role-making process. Previous studies (e.g., Atuahene-Gima and Li 2002) found that the strength of social ties

among commercial partners influences role definition. When a customer relationship is characterized by a commercial friendship (Price and Arnould 1999), a type of strong social tie, norms of the personal relationship affect commercial norms and behaviors of partners (e.g., Heide and Wathne 2006). The question here is whether the new role (that of advocate undertaken by a new customer) is a function of the social ties or of salesperson behaviors that create role expectations.

In order to gain a deeper understanding of advocate-making, this study examines the influence of the triad *new customer-advocate-salesperson* on new customer advocacy behavior. The focus is on the strength of social ties among the actors and on the transitivity in social structures, along with an examination of the impact of attributed expertise to the advocate on the new customer-salesperson tie development.

#### **New Customer-salesperson social tie and advocacy behavior**

Previous research indicates that customer satisfaction with relationship quality can explain customer advocacy (e.g., Deleon and Chatterjee 2017). Different kinds of benefits, including psychological, social and economic, of a close relationship with the salesperson can generate customer social satisfaction (e.g., Paul et al. 2009). Psychological benefits refer to the comfort of the relationship or the feeling of security inspired by the salesperson. The main psychological benefits are reducing anxiety and risk perception for the customer and creating realistic expectations of the product or service (Deleon and Chatterjee 2017). Researchers have long argued that maintenance of a strong social tie is more governed by mechanisms of trust in the relational contract than by the traditional governance of markets (e.g. Granovetter 1985). Gwinner, Gremler, and Bitner (1998) suggest the emergence of a kind of friendship over repeated exchanges between the customer and the salesperson. Social benefits focus on the relationship itself rather than the result of the transaction (Hennig-Thurau, Gwinner, and Gremler 2002). They are the emotional part of the relationship and are characterized by personalized exchanges, familiarity and the emergence of a friendship between the partners (Price and Arnould 1999). Several studies, including Deleon and Chatterjee (2017) have shown

that social aspects of customer-salesperson relationship determine customer loyalty including word-of-mouth behavior. Furthermore, the customer who becomes a friend recommends products and the salesperson to others (Heide and Wathne 2006). Therefore, we expect that the stronger the new customer-salesperson tie, the more likely the new customer will advocate for the salesperson and product.

*Hypothesis 1: The strength of new customer-salesperson social tie is positively related to advocacy behavior.*

Hypotheses 2 through 6 focus on the expected antecedent relationships that influence strength of new customer-salesperson social tie necessary to achieve new customer advocacy behavior.

### **Pre-existing social ties in the pox triple**

The *pox triple* construct was introduced by Heider (1946) where *p* is a focal person, *o* another actor and *x* an object (which may be a third person). In our research *p* refers to the initial advocate, *o* refers to the new customer and *x* means the salesperson. In this way, Heider (1946) describes and empirically demonstrates such naïve maxims as “the friends of my friends are my friends” or “the enemies of my enemies are my friends”. Granovetter (1973) called these maxims the law of transitivity within social networks, such that if an individual A maintains a strong social tie with an individual B and A maintains a strong social tie with C, then it is very likely that B and C will have a weak or strong social tie also. In this study, we apply the law of transitivity to understand how new customers may be socialized into the advocate role when introduced to the salesperson through another advocate.

Based on the law of transitivity, we argue that the strength of the new customer-salesperson social tie depends on the social ties between the existing advocate and the new customer, and the advocate and salesperson. First, we are interested in the influence of the advocate (information source) on new customer behavior toward the salesperson. Others have shown that the stronger the new customer-advocate social tie, the stronger the influence of the advocate on new customer economic behavior (Bristol 1990). A new customer may imitate

an advocate because of a desire for affiliation toward the advocate or a social group that the advocate represents (Harakeh et al. 2007). Thus we expect new customer-advocate pre-existing social tie to influence creation and development of new customer-salesperson social tie.

*Hypothesis 2: The strength of new customer-advocate social tie is positively related to the strength of new customer-salesperson social tie.*

The new customer perception of the strength of advocate-salesperson tie derives from the focus on how the actors (advocate and salesperson) describe their relationship through verbal recommendation (Bone 1995). Customer perception of tie strength can result from the observation of the advocate's and salesperson's behaviors. This observation thus tends to influence the way the customer understands the development of his or her own relationship with the salesperson. The new customer tends to behave towards the salesperson in a way similar to the advocate, particularly to the extent that the results correspond to their needs. As we have noted, advocacy behavior is likely because the tie shared with the advocate is strong. Therefore, in the *pox triple*, the advocate's behaviors toward the salesperson influence customer behaviors in market relationships under the existence of a strong advocate-customer social tie condition.

*Hypothesis 3: The strength of advocate-salesperson social tie perceived by the new customer is positively related to the strength of customer-salesperson social tie.*

### **The expertise assigned to the advocate**

In addition to the links shared by the actors, there is another important variable: the expertise assigned to the advocate by the new customer. The assessment of the advocate's expertise depends on product knowledge and the ability to bring an appropriate response to what the consumer needs (Gershoff, Broniarczyk, and West 2001). The expertise assigned to the advocate acts as security for the consumer (Bickart and Shindler 2001). Assigned expertise, though, is not sufficient to induce influence. Consideration must also be given to the consumer's own perception of expertise relative to the source (Mugny and Falomir 1999); in this case, the

advocate. Marketing literature states that the consumer tends to imitate a source of information considered as expert (e.g., Eliashberg and Shugan 1997). The expertise that the new customer assigns to an advocate determines conscious imitative behavior (Gershoff, Broniarczyk, and West 2001). Therefore, if a new customer assigns high expertise to an advocate on products and the salesperson's qualities, it is likely that the advocate's behavior will be imitated or repeated by the new customer. To the extent that an advocate who recommends a salesperson tends to develop a positive tie with that salesperson, the customer is encouraged to create and develop a similar tie. Thus, we hypothesize:

*Hypothesis 4: The expertise assigned to the advocate is positively related to the strength of new customer-salesperson social tie.*

### **The salesperson's role performance**

To further explain the development of the strength of new customer-salesperson social ties, we take into account the salesperson's role performance. Through this lens, we can examine the degree to which the new customer's advocacy behavior is a function of role-making in the new social tie rather than pre-existing social ties. Intra-role performance is defined as salesperson behaviors towards customers expected or required by management (Choi, Huang, and Sternquist 2015). Subject to the condition that the prescribed salesperson role by the firm (customer satisfaction, customer retention) corresponds to the customer expectations (listening and empathy) the salesperson should create a positive relationship with the new customer (Deleon and Chatterjee 2017).

*Hypothesis 5: Salesperson intra-role performance is positively related to the strength of new customer-salesperson social tie.*

On the other hand, extra-role performance may be necessary to create a positive relationship with the customer. Extra-role performance refers to behaviors that go beyond what is expected or required from the salesperson (Mehl and Hansen 2017), in this case beyond what is expected by the new customer. Others have referred to extra-role performance as part of organizational citizenship behaviors towards customers

(Choi et al. 2015). As such, these behaviors can be defined generally as individualized acts directed at customers and at the discretion of employees. Since these extra-role behaviors may reflect actions beyond the norms associated with expected salesperson/customer reciprocity, we believe that extra-role behaviors in selling have a positive influence on the strength of new customer-salesperson social tie. Therefore, we hypothesize:

*Hypothesis 6: The salesperson extra-role performance is positively related to the strength of new customer-salesperson social tie.*

## **THE STUDY**

### **Sample**

Data were collected in France utilizing a web-based survey administered to 962 customers from seven direct selling companies that sell basic consumables such as cosmetic products, textile or health care, body care and home care products. The direct selling industry employs over 107 million salespeople globally with over 650,000 independent representatives in France (WFDSA 2017). The companies selected have an equivalent average order size in comparison to global statistics. With regard to the questionnaire administration, each customer was emailed a web link and could complete the survey online. Respondents were not acquaintances of their salesperson prior to the first transaction, as self-reported, ensuring that the partners created and developed a social tie as part of a commercial relationship. Furthermore, the respondent must have met her salesperson from the social recommendation of an advocate, thus, the advocate influencing new customer behavior from the start of the new customer-salesperson relationship. A total of 176 usable questionnaires were obtained (an 18 percent response rate). Seven percent of customers buy frequently, (once a month or more), 46 percent buy an average of once a quarter, 42 percent buy once every two quarters and 5 percent buy only once a year. According to practitioners and the French Direct Selling Association, the average frequency of purchase is between once per quarter and once every two quarters; therefore, the sample represents the population in terms of purchase frequency. Finally, participating companies sent the internet link both to "regular customers" and to "less regular customers".

Given the prevalence of females in the direct selling industries, approximately 75 percent globally and 80 percent in France (WFDSA 2017), there is no surprise that 99 percent of respondents are women. Early (first 20 percent) and late (last 20 percent) responders were compared to determine the possibility of non-response bias (Armstrong and Overton, 1977). There were no significant differences, suggesting that response bias is likely to be minimal in this sample.

## Measures

All constructs were measured with seven-point scales ranging from “not agree at all” to “totally agree”. To measure the *strength of new customer-advocate social tie*, the *strength of new customer-salesperson social tie*, and the *perceived strength of advocate-salesperson social tie*, we adapted the scale developed for a home party selling context by Frenzen and Davis (1990). The four items per scale were derived from the social tie definition of Granovetter (1973) using the four criteria: time devoted to the relationship, affectivity, intimacy and reciprocity. The *salesperson intra-role performance* scale consisted of the five item scale used by Cravens et al. (1993), which they derived from the thirty-one item scale developed by Behrman and Perreault (1982). We adapted the scale to the context studied.

The *salesperson extra-role performance* is a set of discretionary behaviors oriented to customer satisfaction. Given the plurality of behaviors that characterize the construct, a precise operational definition of this variable was critical. From this perspective, the five-item scale developed by Bettencourt and Brown (1997) in a service marketing context was the most appropriate in our study. This scale was used to measure the salesperson extra-role performance through the customer’s eye.

*Advocate expertise* refers to the degree of expertise that the customer ascribes to the advocate with regards to their knowledge about the salesperson, the sales approach and product offering. Similar to other studies, we consider the home party shopping experience as important as the products purchased (Sammon and Kwon 2015). Because of the diversity of products typically sold through home selling parties and the nature of the direct selling process, we chose to focus

on the advocate’s expertise of the sales approach. Composed of five items, the scale selected to measure *advocate expertise* was derived from the scale originally developed by Netemeyer and Bearden (1992).

For *new customer advocacy behavior*, the scale selected is a short form of the initial version used by Zeithaml, Berry, and Parasuraman (1996). We developed a two-item scale adapted to the direct selling context with the same logic as Bettencourt (1997) in the retail context. See the Appendix for scale items.

## Analyses

The Exploratory factor analysis (EFA) based on principle component analysis method is adapted to identify the underlying dimensions for advocate expertise, perceived strength of advocate-salesperson social tie, the strength of customer-advocate social tie, salesperson intra-role performance, salesperson extra-role performance, the strength of new customer-salesperson social tie and new customer advocacy behavior. A factor loading of 0.5 or higher was used as the criterion to include the variables in each factor. The initial EFA results suggested to eliminate six variables in the seven factors to obtain a better model. The final EFA identified one dimension for each factor. All of the provided statistical indices (Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO), variance explained, and Bartlett’s index) suggest that the factor analyses were appropriate. The Cronbach  $\alpha$ s were computed and verified the reliability of the variables in each factor. The results of the final EFA and their Cronbach  $\alpha$ s are presented in Table 1.

A confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was conducted to evaluate the model using the factors obtained from the EFA. The CFA was necessary because the confirmatory measurement model should be evaluated and re-specified before the measurement and structural equation models are examined simultaneously (Anderson and Gerbing 1998; Yoon and Uysal 2005; Lee et al. 2007). As suggested by Jöreskog and Sörbom (1993), for the CFA analysis, items having a coefficient alpha below 0.3 were deleted from analysis. The model fitting and estimation were implemented using IBM SPSS Amos 23.0.0. The descriptive statistics and zero-order correlations between factors are presented in Table 2.



Table 1. Results of exploratory factor analysis

Factors	Factor Loading	Cronbach's alpha	Eigen value	Explained Variance (%)	KMO	Bartlett's
<b>The strength of new customer-salesperson social tie:</b>		0.928	2.624	87.473	0.752	421.809***
SONCSST1	0.922					
SONCSST2	0.932					
SONCSST3	0.951					
<b>The strength of new customer-advocate social tie:</b>		0.952	3.499	87.479	0.863	734.228***
SOCASST1	0.914					
SOCASST2	0.955					
SOCASST3	0.940					
SOCASST4	0.931					
<b>Perceived strength of advocate-salesperson social tie:</b>		0.952	3.501	87.527	0.857	752.354***
PSOASST1	0.908					
PSOASST2	0.961					
PSOASST3	0.949					
PSOASST4	0.923					
<b>Advocate expertise:</b>		0.851	2.828	70.709	0.779	366.324***
ADEXP1	0.911					
ADEXP2	0.876					
ADEXP3	0.862					
ADEXP5	0.697					
<b>Salesperson extra-role performance:</b>		0.771	2.671	66.758	0.692	250.720***
SEPERF1	0.805					
SEPERF2	0.802					
SEPERF4	0.839					
SEPERF5	0.821					
<b>Salesperson intra-role performance:</b>		0.683	2.423	80.778	0.719	111.139***
SIPERF1	0.856					
SIPERF2	0.918					
SIPERF3	0.921					
<b>New Customer Advocacy Behavior:</b>		0.642	1.524	76.220	0.50	55.793***
NCABE1	0.873					
NCABE2	0.873					

Note: \*\*\*: p&lt;0.001

Table 2. Factor descriptive statistics and correlations

	Mean	S.D.	SOCASST	PSOASST	ADEXP	SEPERF	SIPERF	NCABE
SONCSST	4.756	1.636	0.589**	0.657**	0.268**	0.494**	0.352**	0.273**
SOCASST	5.034	1.650		0.664**	0.221**	0.357**	0.296**	0.159*
PSOASST	4.797	1.489			0.185*	0.390**	0.256**	0.140
ADEXP	6.152	1.120				0.269**	0.316**	0.288**
SEPERF	5.939	1.054					0.564**	0.293**
SIPERF	6.405	0.746						0.425**
NCABE	6.099	0.997						

Note: n=176; \*: p&lt;0.05; \*\*: p&lt;0.01

**Structural equation model.** Since the model fitted the collected sample data at an acceptable level, two structural equation models (SEM) were proposed and tested to see if the collected data supported the theoretical model. Since the value of the chi-square statistics depend on sample size, we also examined two types of overall fit indices: the absolute fit index that directly evaluates how well the prior theoretical model fits the sample data, and the parsimonious fit index that is used to diagnose whether model fit has been achieved by overfitting the data with too many coefficients (Hu and Bentler 1995). The other goodness-of-fit indices are adapted to further evaluate the model evaluation (Bentler 1990; Jöreskog and Sörbom 1993).

This study tested two theoretical models. First, as indicated in hypothesis 1, our study aims to test the relationship between the two factors, strength of new customer-salesperson social tie (SONCSST) and new customer advocacy behavior (NCABE), while other factors were not considered. Therefore, this model contained five variables in two factors. Second, as specified in hypotheses 2 through 6, our study tested the relationships among those seven factors, while the correlations between factors were taken into account.

While testing the relationship between the SONCSST and NCABE, the three variables in SONCSST and the

two variables in NCABE were entered to the model. After examining the critical indices ( $\chi^2=4.897$ ;  $df=4$ ;  $CFI=0.998$ ;  $RMSEA=0.036$ ;  $NFI=0.990$ ), the model verified a good fit.

**The theoretical model.** The factors derived from EFA for advocate expertise (ADEXP), perceived strength of advocate-salesperson social tie (PSOASST), the strength of new customer-advocate social tie (SOCAST), salesperson intra-role performance (SIPERF), salesperson extra-role performance (SEPERF) were treated as exogenous constructs and that for the strength of new customer-salesperson social tie and new customer advocacy behavior were treated as endogenous constructs in the theoretical SEM in this study. The theoretical SEM included five paths from the exogenous constructs (advocate expertise, perceived strength of advocate-salesperson social tie, the strength of new customer-advocate social tie, salesperson intra-role performance, salesperson extra-role performance) to the endogenous construct, the strength of new customer-salesperson social tie, and one path from the strength of new customer-salesperson social tie to the other endogenous construct, new customer advocacy behavior (see Figure 1 for detail). The model fit for the proposed model was not acceptable; therefore, a revised model is presented.

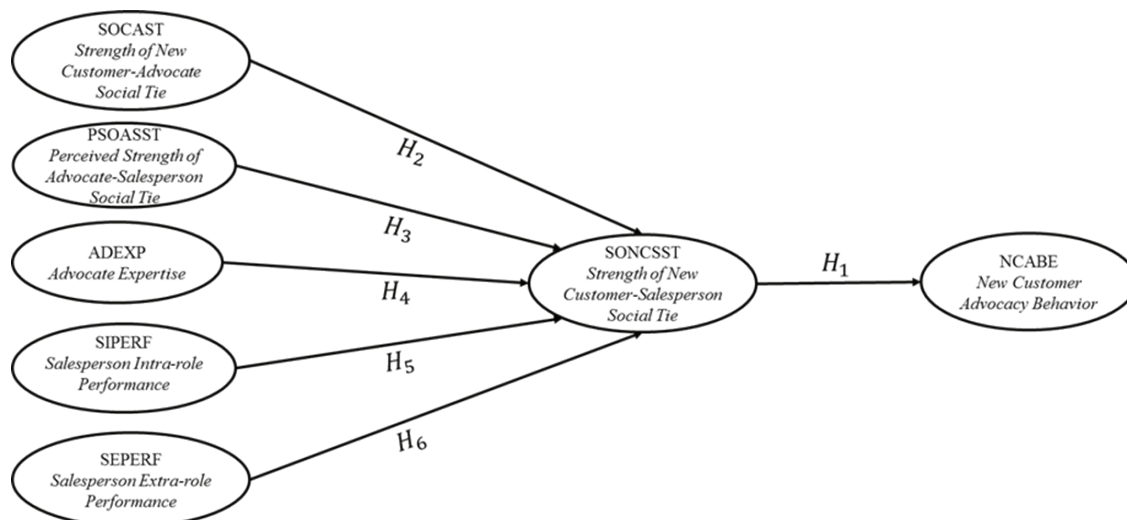


Figure 1: The Theoretical Model

**The revised model.** After examining the modification indices, one path from salesperson intra-role performance to new customer advocacy behavior and one path from advocate expertise to new customer advocacy behavior are suggested. The paths from salesperson intra-role performance to the strength of new customer-salesperson social tie and from the strength of new customer-salesperson social tie to new customer advocacy behavior were removed since the correlation coefficients were not significant (See Figure 2). After examining the critical indices ( $\chi^2=423.146$ ;  $df=231$ ;  $CFI=0.945$ ;  $RMSEA=0.069$ ;  $NFI=0.887$ ), the model is verified to be a good fit. The revised SEM was considered a more parsimonious model and a better model to illustrate the proposed hypothesized relationships among the exogenous and endogenous constructs in the structural equation model.

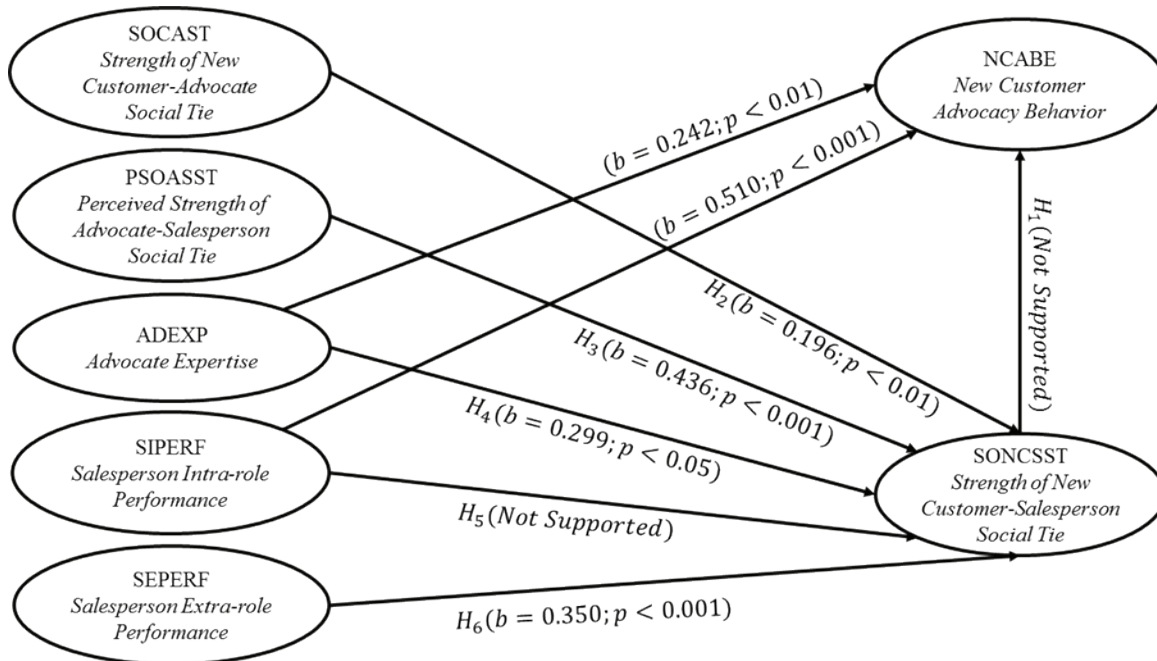


Figure 2: The Revised Model

## Results

Hypothesis 1 predicts that the strength of new customer-salesperson social tie is related to the new customer advocacy behavior. The data supported this hypothesis (standardized coefficient=0.151;  $p<0.001$ ) when no other factors are considered.

Hypotheses 2 through 6 state that perceived strength of advocate-salesperson social tie, the strength of customer-advocate social tie, advocate expertise, salesperson intra-role performance, and salesperson extra-role performance will be positively related to the strength of new customer-salesperson social tie. Whereas four of the five hypothesis are supported, one is not. Those supported include hypothesis 2, the strength

of new customer-advocate social tie is positively related to the strength of new customer-salesperson social tie (standardized coefficient = 0.196,  $p<0.01$ ), hypothesis 3, perceived strength of advocate-salesperson social tie is positively related to the strength of new customer-salesperson social tie (standardized coefficient = 0.436,  $p<0.001$ ), hypothesis 4, advocate expertise is positively related to the strength of new customer-salesperson social tie (standardized coefficient = 0.299,  $p<0.05$ ), and hypothesis 6, salesperson extra-role performance is positively related to the strength of new customer-salesperson social tie (standardized coefficient = 0.350,  $p<0.001$ ). Hypothesis 5 related to salesperson intra-role performance was not supported.



### Post hoc analyses

To reflect other potential relationships found in our conceptual model not formally hypothesized, we tested relationships between all constructs. Two new paths were identified. One is between advocate expertise and the new customer advocacy behavior (standardized coefficient = 0.242,  $p < 0.01$ ) and the other is between the salesperson intra-role performance and the new customer advocacy behavior (standardized coefficient = 0.510,  $p < 0.001$ ). These findings will be discussed in the following section.

More significantly, the relationship between the strength of new customer-salesperson social tie and the new customer advocacy behavior is no longer significant in the revised model. The results suggest that compared to other relationships, the relationship between the strength of new customer-salesperson social tie and the new customer advocacy behavior seems to be less important.

### DISCUSSION

The results of this study shed light on our understanding of customer advocacy. Advocacy, defined here in the sense of ongoing promotional activity by a new customer, is associated with the strength of the social tie between the new customer and the salesperson. There is evidence to suggest the strength of the new customer-salesperson social tie is itself a function of the perceived strength of the social tie between the advocate and the salesperson. Our findings suggest there are other, more direct factors that influence new customer advocacy behavior, such as advocate expertise and intra-role salesperson behavior.

Both strength of new customer-advocate social tie and perceived strength of advocate-salesperson social tie were significant in influencing the salesperson-new customer tie, providing further understanding of the transitive nature of social capital as suggested in earlier research (e.g., Hummon and Doreian 2003), yet it is not a sufficient predictor of advocacy. New customer advocacy behavior does not require a strong new customer-salesperson tie, a benefit for salespeople in several regards. Salespeople can generate advocacy through in-role performance irrespective of the strength of the social ties among actors in the social network.

The potential influence of an advocate (new or old) is not limited to a close circle of strong ties. These findings provide support for the strength of weak ties in direct selling.

As observed, intra-role performance by the salesperson led directly to advocacy; thus, performance of essential role functions by the salesperson is needed in order to generate advocacy. This finding is similar to those in the loyalty research that indicate the importance of performance on key dimensions (e.g., Sirdeshmukh et al. 2002). However, it is important to note that intra-role behaviors did not contribute to the social tie between customer and salesperson. While necessary for advocacy behavior, perhaps intra-role performance is insufficient, and overshadowed in the making of a social tie by the extra-role behavior. Future research should seek to understand these complex relationships.

Role theory may be used to explain our findings. The role of advocate undertaken by the new customer is a function of salesperson intra-role behaviors that create role expectations. While there are common expectations about role behaviors, behaviors of each role player will differ as a function of the learned expectations within the specific setting (Solomon et al. 1985). Social interaction is often directed “by learned assumptions regarding the course the interaction should take” (Solomon et al. 1985, p. 103). In role theory, scripts provide information to individuals regarding their own expected behavior and the complementary expected behaviors of others in the role set reflecting the individuals learned concept of the service experience, such as in a direct selling context. In the direct selling context, new customer role expectations, whether implicit or explicit, include extending the social network. Social obligation may influence new customer advocacy behaviors when the salesperson performs expected intra-role behaviors aimed directly at the new customer. The new customer feels obligated to reciprocate by performing expected role behaviors within the learned script of direct selling, in this case advocacy behaviors. If the salesperson meets expectations of perceived intra-role performance, new customers are more likely to reciprocate in their role of advocate. Additionally, our findings suggest the closer the social ties, the less obligation the new customer may feel to perform in an advocacy role. Perhaps there is

less pressure due to the perception that stronger ties are less likely to be broken due to lack of reciprocity. This finding should be investigated in future research.

The observation regarding the role of the advocate expertise suggests that social learning (Bandura 1977) may be an important factor in the creation of advocates, as advocacy may be imitated when observed. The new customer observes advocacy and mimics that advocacy based on perceived knowledge, competence, expertise, and experience with the home selling approach of the original advocate, and replicates advocacy behavior modeled by the advocate irrespective of the strength of the social tie. The advocate has to be believable before advocacy can have influence; hence the need for perceived expertise. This expertise may be similar to the expertise of opinion leaders (e.g., Godes and Mayzlin 2009), which could include those for whom one has no previous social tie. Future research should consider the relative importance of trusted sources, such as bloggers, with whom there is no personal social relationship but with whom a relationship based on that expertise may be perceived, and whether advocacy ensues when following a trusted source's recommendation.

Though the hypothesized relationship between new customer-salesperson social tie and advocacy behavior was not entirely supported, the importance of this social tie cannot be overlooked. As an indication of the importance of the new customer-salesperson social tie, extra-role performance did not have a direct relationship on advocacy behavior. These additional investments in the relationship appear to pay off in the form of stronger social ties. This finding supports the notion that delighting the customer (Carlzon 1989) through delivery of some additional unexpected service can yield important benefits but only to the extent that this delight creates a strong relationship. In light of these findings, future research should consider other important outcomes to the direct selling organization and salesperson, such as new customer purchasing behavior and repurchase intention, which may be related to strength of new customer-salesperson social tie.

### **Limitations and Future Research**

The present study design is prone to common method bias as all information were collected from one source.

To examine the extent of common method bias within the data we conducted Harman's single factor test. The results suggest that a single factor model has a poor fit ( $\chi^2=116767.000$ ;  $df=300$ ;  $CFI=0.000$ ;  $RMSEA=0.268$ ;  $NFI=0.000$ ). This evidence implies that common method bias is not an issue.

Similarly, work should be continued to develop deeper measures of advocacy behavior. In this study, a 2-item measure served but future research should consider exploring whether additional items would yield stronger results.

Because our focus was on the social network, product performance was assumed to be satisfactory. This assumption needs to be tested in the context of advocacy; to what degree can outstanding product performance overcome, for example, the lack of a social network and create advocacy? What interactions may be necessary to yield advocacy, and for what does one advocate? There may be differences in what leads to advocacy for a product versus advocacy for a salesperson. These are important questions for future research. While we chose to focus on the sales approach in the current study, future research should consider new customers' perceptions of advocate product knowledge and knowledge of the salesperson.

To assume that the relationships between variables observed in this study would be held universally across cultures would be a mistake. This study was conducted in France, and culture is likely to have had an influence. Cross-cultural work is needed to understand how social networks operate in the creation of advocacy.

Similarly, this sample was comprised of consumers. Replicating the study with a sample of business buyers should add value to the literature exploring the concepts and theory regarding business or commercial friends as advocates (e.g., Bäckström 2008).

### **Managerial Implications**

This study provides managerial implications for organizations relying on salespeople. All salespeople should attempt to secure referrals from customers, new and old alike (Berman 2016; Tanner et al., 2014), whether the social tie is strong or weak. This research suggests advocacy behavior can be the result of

salesperson intra-role behavior, while delighting the customer through extra-role behaviors does not impact advocacy behavior directly.

Further, salespeople should prioritize their attempts to secure referrals and advocacy behavior by first going to those new customers identified through advocates with greater experience and expertise. When greater perceived advocate expertise exists, there is greater likelihood of advocacy by the new customer. Thus, not all referrals are of equal value; a referral from a customer who exhibits lower levels of expertise is also less likely to provide advocacy among new customers. Advocates have to be perceived as holding expertise. This suggests that investing resources in developing advocates' expertise will pay off with stronger results. Such resources may include additional training on products, encouraging access of web pages with product details, and other mechanisms for enabling advocates to develop expertise.

In sum, this study highlights the potential of preexisting social ties in influencing advocacy behavior, as constrained by roles. In today's empowered market, salesperson performance is an important factor, both directly (intra-role) and indirectly through the customer/salesperson tie (extra-role). Advocates, though, should be considered as possessing expertise in order for new customers to imitate their advocacy behavior. Finally, the intra-role performance of salespeople is critical in generating advocacy among new customers.

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## **APPENDIX**

### **Measures**

The strength of new customer-salesperson social tie (SONCSST)

SONCSST1 - There are some people in your life in whom you want to confide. She or he (salesperson) is one of those people.

SONCSST2 - There are some people in your life with whom you would spend a free afternoon. She or he (salesperson) is one of those people.

SONCSST3 - She or he (salesperson) is a person who would do you a great favor if you need it.

The strength of new customer-advocate social tie (SOCAST)

SOCAST1 - There are some people in your life who you want to confide you. She or he (advocate) is one of those people.

SOCAST2 - There are some people in your life with whom you would spend a free afternoon. She or he (advocate) is one of those people.

SOCAST3 - She or he (advocate) is a person who would do you a great favor if you need it.

SOCAST4 - There are some people in your life with whom you feel close. She or he (advocate) is one of those people.

Perceived strength of advocate-salesperson social tie (PSOASST)

PSOASST1 - There are some people in her life who she wants to confide. The salesperson is one of those people.

PSOASST2 - There are some people in her life with whom she would spend a free afternoon. The salesperson is one of those people.

PSOASST3 - She or he (salesperson) is a person who would do a great favor if she needs it.

PSOASST4 - There are some people in her life with whom she feels close. She or he (salesperson) is one of those people.

Advocate expertise (ADEXP)

ADEXP1 - She/He knows home party selling.

ADEXP2 - She/He is competent to tell me about home party selling.

ADEXP3 - She/He is an expert in terms of home party selling.

ADEXP5 - She/He has attended several home parties.

Salesperson intra-role performance (SIPERF)

SIPERF1 - She/He listens to me attentively to identify and understand my real concerns.

SIPERF2 - She/He convinces me that she understand my unique problems and concerns.

SIPERF3 - She/He uses our relationship to develop new customers.

Salesperson extra-role performance (SEPERF)

SEPERF1 - She/He voluntarily assists customers even if it means going beyond job requirements.

SEPERF2 - She/He helps customers with problems beyond what is expected or required.

SEPERF4 - She/He willingly goes out of his/her way to make a customer satisfied.

SEPERF5 - She/He frequently goes out the way to help a customer.

New Customer Advocacy Behavior (NCABE)

NCABE1 - Say positive things about product offering to other people.

NCABE2 - Encourage friends and relatives to do business with my direct seller.